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Race, Caste and Identity Politics in the Plays of August Wilson and Datta Bhagat : A Comparative Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

The present research study proposes to make a comparative study of the selected plays of the renowned Afro-American playwright, August Wilson (1945-2005) and the contemporary Indian playwright Datta Bhagat (b.1945-) with the focus on the politics of race, caste and identity as reflected in the selected plays. The prime objective of this study is to compare and contrast the socio-cultural dynamics in America and India, as reflected in their selected plays. The contribution of August Wilson and Datta Bhagat respectively to the Afro-American dramatic tradition and Indian Dalit theatre remain enviable and unparalleled. August Wilson and Datta Bhagat had no actual contact with each other. Indeed, the two playwrights were far from each other, the one lived in America, the other in India. However, the problem of caste and color conflict highlighted in their works tempted to compare them in literary studies. Moreover, the two playwrights may present interesting subject for the comparative study of Indian and American literatures and cultures.

The plays of August Wilson and Datta Bhagat are useful in setting up the basic framework of how racism and castism stay rooted in so called sophisticated societies, the one most powerful democracy in the world and the other world's largest democracy. No matter whether it is medieval society or modern era of twenty first century, humankind is still suffering with the basic issues of inequality, injustice, discrimination and racial segregation. Moreover, these dramatists provide compelling arguments to support their theories how the upper class has exploited the subalterns (blacks, dalits, women etc).Wilson started his career as a poet writing for magazines such as Harper's. His first play *Recycling,* was performed for audiences in small theaters, schools and public housing community centers followed by such plays as *Fullerton Street (1980), Black Bart and the Sacred Hills (1981), Jitney (1982) Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1984)*, *Fences* (1987) and *Joe Turner's Come and Go.*

Wilson used his dramatic art as a tool politicizing the community and raised the consciousness of the people. He advocates that African-American people re-establish the link with their African culture heritage, as he told interviewer Sandra G. Shannon in African American Review, *"I have always consciously been chasing the musicians, it's like our culture*

is in music. And the writers are way behind the musicians I see. So I'm trying to close the gap." Wilson was highly influenced by Blues, as he felt it is very essential for the empowerment and the cultural affirmation of African-American people, he opines that the, "*linkage will Africa in art, music and writing… (is) crucial to their liberation from western influence."* Even all of his characters end up singing the blues to show their feelings at key moments during his plays like .*Fences* .

August Wilson constructing his dramas based on personal experiences – chased American Dream of the right to pursue happiness and the equal status of belief, gender and race. The problem presented in his plays serves to illuminate the basis of ongoing racial segregation and provides possible solution. In his play *Fences* which is one of his important cycle plays, Wilson portrays the racial conflict between white and black community. Set in 1950s, its central character Troy Maxon, a garbage collector whose dream of playing professional baseball shattered by white racism, the title presents Wilson's concern with choices and responsibility, as fences can keep people in as well as out.*"Some people build fences to keep people out…and other people build fences to keep people in."* It is what Bono explains Troy why Rose wants to build fence. The title is highly symbolic; it is not just about physical fences around the house but about racial fences that separates people.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone, is another play which reflects racial tensions. This play is about a freed black man's search for his wife who disappeared during his enslavement. The play focuses on the theme of African American migration from the agricultural South to industrial cities of North in the early twentieth century. .

Datta Bhagat, a renowned name in the field of Dalit Theater His plays deal with social, religious and political agitation. He started his career as a short story writer but soon devoted to theater. He was first introduce to readers in 1964, but it was *Avart (Whirlpool),* the play that gave him recognition. His one act plays highly praised by reputed critics and men of theaters. Datta Bhagat's *Wata-Palwata (1986)* translated into English as *Routes and Escape Routes* won him world- wide recognition and critics praised him for his dramatic art. Among his other successful plays include *Ekti, Ashmak* and *Khelia.* Though after 2000 his writing not came in abundance like early on but his intellectual writing has became fiercer. His essays on Dalit Movement, Dalit

Literature and on Marathi Literature are characterized by painstakingly amassed evidence, reason and sobriety of judgment.

The play that gave Bhagat wide critical acclaim is *Avart* translated as *Whirlpool.* It was written in 1978, in two popular traditional forms of Dindi and Tamasha. The reason behind using these forms was that these forms are affiliated to their lower caste Mahar practitioners, like African Americans with Blues. The play set on the background of the pilgrimage to Pandharpur. *Whirlpool* opens with witty conversation between the *Vidusaka* and *Sutradhar* having verbal banter over a new subject of Tamasha/Loknatya—Dalit consciousness. Talking on various moments in history of Dalit oppression, centers on one story of murdered Manohar. The story ends with a trial that fails to give justice even in the presence of Manohar, who rises like phoenix and relates himself with every Dalit oppressed throughout history. The story is symbolic one; it is just beginning of Dalit consciousness that is waiting to express itself but unable due to a history of murderous silence. The character of Manohar, an educated Dalit youth, can sinuously transform into the Mahar agricultural laborer robbed of his privileges of Baluta.

Routes and Escape Routes is the play that gave Datta Bhagat international recognition. The play presents three generations of a Dalit family and their differing responses to a situation of Dalit need and caste violence. The play constructs caste mentalities as unsurpassable in order to critique humanism and so merge a critique of a middle class Dalit protagonist that brings his limitations of comprehensive Dalit victimhood. The main course of the play is a discussion between its two protagonists a Dalit professor Satish and his student Arjun, over how to redress government apathy over the construction and distribution of houses for the poor flood victims. Arjun decides to take control of the houses and resettle only Dalit families, while Satish resolves that this move alienate those flood victims who are poor but not Dalit. The violent clash between the two flood victim communities highlights the limitations of Satish's idealism—dissolution of caste identities and Arjun's impatience. As a result casteist and conservative mentalities win in the play.

Origin of the Research Problem

This study seeks to examine the fundamental issues of race, caste and identity leading to discrimination, inequity, oppression and injustice, as reflected in the selected plays written by

August Wilson and Datta Bhagat. Even the developed countries like America could not settle the problems emanating from the racial prejudices and practices. Similarly India, being the world's largest democracy fails to tackle the issues related to caste discrimination and exploitation. Despite major paradigm shifts brought about by the avalanche of information technology and scientific advancements, the innate human longing for individual identity continues to remain a major tour de force in both life and literature.

Objectives of the study:

The principal objective of the study is to make an in-depth, comparative analysis of ten representative Afro-American and Indian novels. Some of the major objectives of this study are noted down below:

1. To explore the crucial issues like race, caste and identity in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural set up of India and America.
2. To compare and contrast Indian socio-cultural dynamics in America and India as reflected in the selected plays of August Wilson and Datta Bhagat.
3. Problem of race, caste/ color conflict in the works of August Wilson and Datta Bhagat.
4. To compare the predicatment of women in the works of August Wilson and Datta Bhagat.
5. To explain the reasons behind the racist and/or casteist mentality in American and Indian people.
6. Problem of lack of voice and lack of existence in the works of August Wilson and Datta Bhagat.

Hypothesis of the study

1. The plight of subaltern (Blacks, Dalit, women etc) is predominantly presented in almost all plays of the contemporary American dramatist, August Wilson and Datta Bhagat.
2. The two playwrights are representative of their respective literary traditions and voice the pitiable condition of their communities.

3. They document socio-cultural milieu in the respective countries with an emphasis on caste or color discrimination.
4. Plays of August Wilson and Datta Bhagat describe the problems of the deprived classes of the society

Research Methodology and Chapter Scheme

The research design, used in this study is one of exploratory, analytical and interpretative type. The procedure adopted in the content analysis and description is of both intra-textual and inter-textual nature. The methods common to all disciplines like comparison, contrast, analysis, induction, deduction etc. are also used in this study. The present study is divided into seven chapters planned according to the need of working on specified aspects as per below; .

Chapter 1 Introduction

This chapter intends to analyze the selected plays of August Wilson and Datta Bhagat with a view to study the socio-cultural milieu in America and India respectively. The two dramatists are contemporary writing about their respective countries America and India.

Chapter ll Theoretical framework

This research analyzes the predicament of Afro-American people and the deprived classes, more specifically like Dalits in India. It uses critical perspectives like Marxism, Post-colonial and Subaltern perspective.

Chapter lll August Wilson and Datta Bhagat: A Bio-literary profile

The biographical and literary background of August Wilson and Datta Bhagat will be mentioned in this chapter.

Chapter IV Racial Politics in August Wilson's plays

This chapter intends to analyze the socio-cultural issues and racial conflict in the selected plays of selected plays of August Wilson. It analyses the political situation in America after 1950 and elucidate the significant role of factors like race and ethnicity.

Chapter V Caste conflict and Politics in Datta Bhagat's plays

This chapter intends to analyze the socio-cultural and racial conflict in the selected plays of selected plays of Datta Bhagat.

Chapter VI Conclusion

This chapter will discuss the way two playwright treated themes like color conflict, cast conflict and socio-cultural dynamics. It will be about the conclusions drawn from the analysis.

Contemporary Relevance and Significance of the Study

This research study is of great importance and relevance in the contemporary times when America emerged as world's most powerful country and India is standing at the golden threshold of 'a New Millennium' on the way to becoming a great power. It becomes all the more significant and relevant in comprehending the whole sociology of both countries with common traditions, ideologies and the overall world-view dramatized through these plays.It attempts to provide valuable insights into the history, politics, culture and sociology of the country by offering "an in-depth analysis of the myriad aspects of socio-cultural milieu in India and America" as mediated in the five representative plays of two contemporary playwrights. It tries to establish a close relationship between sociology and literature and thus seeks to promote inter–disciplinary and comparative studies in the related areas like Historiography, Translation, Theratre and Performance Studies and so on. This largely unexplored area of research offers extraordinary possibilities and opportunities for researchers. It is also possible to study the various literatures in the context of reciprocal influences having certain common cultural and historical bonds. The study thus opens up the avenues of critical studies on Indian and American drama adding immensely to the awareness of intrinsic and extrinsic value of Indian and Afro-American drama in the comparative context.

. Scope and Limitations of the study

This research revolves around the three principal issues namely- race, caste and struggle for identity as presented in the selected plays of August Wilson and Datta Bhagat.

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